

“Let Us Reason Together”

Using Study Groups in Teaching

by James Riley Estep, Jr.

Christian educators often advocate the use of small groups as a teaching method for adults. However, the effectiveness of this method sometimes falls short. This occurs when small group discussions become mere time-fillers or serve as little more than opportunities for fellowship over coffee. To maximize the learning potential of small groups, make them *study groups*.

What and Why?

In study groups, learners are asked to do more than merely reflect on personal experience or share perspective. Rather, a study group processes *content*. While group members may on occasion share in a personal way, that will be primarily a means of introducing the subject of the content to be learned. This maximizes the learning potential of the study group.

In the lecture method, the instructor “stands and delivers.” It is a static method of teaching, since the teacher often does not plan for engagement or dialogue. The use of study groups is more dynamic. Not only does such a method *require* dialogue between the teacher and the learners, the learners themselves also will be engaged in dialogue among themselves. Thus the class is not only taught by the teacher, but also forms what may be thought of as minicommunities of learning that are centered on studying the biblical text. Thus everyone is involved in learning God’s truth actively.

Teacher’s Role

The use of study groups requires you as the teacher to prepare in four ways. First, you must *be prepared both to talk and to be silent!* You may have a ready answer to a question posed to the class (or posed by someone in the class), but you will need to harness your enthusiasm to share that answer until your

learners have had adequate opportunity to discuss it among themselves. If your students perceive that you are going to give the “correct” answer to the question—no matter what anyone says in the discussion—they will be hesitant to open up and share their thinking. Don’t stifle the discussion by always giving the right answer.

Second, *you will need more intellectual preparation* for study groups than for the lecture method because of the near certainty that the groups will answer your questions differently from the way you would. Some of these answers are acceptable alternatives, but some will be wrong. You will find it helpful to think through in advance possible responses to the questions you will give your study groups. Be careful to note when someone’s wording of a statement really expresses the correct answer in different terms from the way you would express it.

Third, you will have to *begin your lesson preparation earlier* in the week. The study group method can require handouts, at least, and possibly overhead transparencies or PowerPoint® slides, objects, or games. You will need to have your lesson plan fully developed early enough in the week to allow time to create or secure these things.

Fourth, a vital part of your preparation will be to *arrive early in your classroom* since you may need to make physical changes in the seating arrangements to fit the study group method. Also, with more teaching materials to use, more time may be needed to set things up (example: getting your computer ready for a PowerPoint presentation). Preparation for the use of study groups often requires more work than other methods.

Making It Work

Five practices make for the effective use of study groups. First, allow students adequate time to share with one another. Let them know how many minutes they have to discuss an item; then give a one-minute warning that “time is almost up.” Second, make an intentional decision when you form groups whether or not you want to keep couples together. Groups of odd numbers (three, five, etc.) allow for “unattached” students to feel like they fit in. Groups larger than eight usually don’t work well.

Third, roam around while your students are in their groups. This lets you hear what directions the discussions are taking and redirect if needed. Fourth, write student responses on the board when that time comes. This conveys the fact that you value their responses. It also ensures that you are hearing them accurately. It also allows students to remember what has been said.

Fifth, try to affirm every answer. Rarely will a response be so off track that it

deserves an outright *No!* Instead, affirm what is right in the answer, and then provide the correction. “I see your point, but . . .” or “Well, that would be true if . . .” will encourage discussion and dialogue without the fear of being slapped down for a “wrong” response.

No Fear!

Teachers of adults may avoid using small groups out of fear—fear of losing focus, fear of allowing personal interests to take over, fear that the Bible study will degenerate into a “what it means to me” outcome. But designing your *small groups* to be *study groups* will help your students benefit from a focused investigation of the content and proper application of Scripture. Try it!